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The Virtual Printroom of the Herzog Anton Ulrich-Museum Braunschweig and the Herzog August Bibliothek Wolfenbüttel, funded by the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (DFG)

Thomas Döring, curator of prints and drawings, Herzog Anton Ulrich-Museum, Braunschweig

Our Virtual Printroom – this is the translation of “Virtuelles Kupferstichkabinett” – is a joint project of two cultural heritage institutions run by the Federal State of Lower Saxony, the Herzog Anton Ulrich-Museum in Braunschweig and the Herzog August Library in Wolfenbüttel (which is located only 10 miles from Brunswick). The Virtual Printroom has a twofold character as being a collaborative decentralized project and spearheading a future online-publication of our museum’s general database. The project is funded by the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft – the German Research Foundation – over a period of four years.

Our internet database aims at providing a virtual reuniting of the distinguished collections of old master prints in the Herzog Anton Ulrich-Museum and the Herzog August Library. The holdings of these two institutions have been closely linked with each other throughout their history, as both derive from the Dukes of Braunschweig-Wolfenbüttel of the 17th and 18th centuries.

Images and data have been available online since September 2007. Records are swiftly increasing in number, with 40.000 in total projected by the spring 2011 when the DFG funding will end. By 1 June 2010 we have posted 30.860 catalogue entries and images on the web.

The selection of works for digitization is made with regard to focal points of the collections. The Herzog August Library concentrates on her graphic collection of single sheet prints and on bound volumes of prints, laying stress on the close connection between prints and books in European context. The Herzog Anton Ulrich Museum concentrates on the prints of the German school up to around 1800, starting with the 15th century single-leaf prints. (Netherlandish, Italian and French prints will follow in a sequel project to be set up in 2011; work on a digital online catalog of our drawings will start in the autumn of 2010.)

With our database we want to serve a general public as well as connoisseurs, collectors, scholars, students and artists. Therefore specific emphasis is laid upon art historically and technically correct descriptions of prints by means of controlled terms, outstanding quality of digital images and differentiated search procedures.

In collaboration with the German Documentation Center for Art History – Bildarchiv Foto Marburg – pictorial contents are classified according to Iconclass notations in order to provide a multilingual searching tool for motifs and meanings.

The images can be downloaded in the quality of the page view. Beyond that every image can be zoomed (with a tool named “zoomify”) in order to discern every detail of technique and motif, but it cannot be downloaded in this quality.

What and How can you search within this database?

First you can decide to search in both collections or to exclude one of them. Up to three search categories can be combined. Each field gives you 25 indexed categories that can be combined in various constellations.

Who is working for this database? And what is the role of the curator?

The project team consists of a maximum of eleven persons divided in two units. These units work in a decentralized manner at the respective institutions, submitting data to the common proprietary online-database. The project head is the museum’s Curator of Prints and Drawings supported by the library’s Curator of Manuscripts and Prints. Cataloguing provides full-time work for two art historians, advised by a historian of art technology and aided by four part time student assistants. Digitization is carried out in-house by photographers.

Concerning the role of the curator I can say, that the curator has the full responsibility for this project as a whole: from the initial idea down to every decision about scope, content, structure, accessibility and appearance of the database – of course continuous coordination with the directors of the institutions.

The result of this lean project management is a high efficiency of the work, bringing about new features almost every month: Since some weeks we an English version of the search screen and the search help is available. Brand new is the possibility to compare images (including zoomed details) of selected prints side by side on the screen. Another new feature is the indication of the depicted place via Getty Thesaurus of Geographical Names and google maps.

Of course the lean project management and the emphasis on the art historical capacities have their flip side, too. For all the programming work there just one (brilliant) student of information technology to rely on. Additional programming is being done by my library colleague himself.

In sum, the project benefits strongly from the exemplary co-operation between museum and library, combining the strengths of the respective institutions: the museum provides art historical tradition and the practice of cataloguing works of art, while the library contributes state-of-the-art knowledge and technology for all matters of digitization, data management, and database-networking.

I can definitely recommend this kind of co-operation between museum and library for small or mid-size museums without departments or experts for Information Technology and collection management.

It is our aim to extend the Virtual Printroom as a joint venture on a long-term basis. The objective is to make accessible on the Internet all printed images from our collections, including bound volumes and book illustrations. The result will be an atlas of the early modern view on the material and spiritual world in its totality of image and word.

We support the concept of collaborative cataloguing and of sharing metadata by observing standards for their collecting and processing. We see the need of making core data accessible and traceable in central portals. Therefore our data can be transferred via Open Archives Initiative harvesting protocol using the innovative museumdat-format derived from Getty's CDWA lite-format.

Thus we will share our metadata with the Image Index (Bildindex) of Foto Marburg, and we are in negotiations with the cultural heritage portals Europeana, Athena and BAM (which stands for library, archive, museum).

My concluding remark touches upon the specific relationship between prints, digitization and database networking.

Recently a colleague from an image archive said in a conversation: "Well, prints, isn't that a side issue?" The answer was and still is: No it's not a side issue, the opposite is true. My statement is that the print, being a technical image in itself, can serve not only as a suitable object but also as a historical paradigm for the omnipresent digital image. Therefore prints should play the role of a pacemaker in the process of making our collections accessible on the Internet.

The multiple existence of a print in various collections does virtually call for more than an isolated database. A logical consequence of the advancement of systematic indexing is a web-based collective index of prints cumulating the data pools of many print collections.

This vision is a curatorial one, and who, if not the curators themselves, have the knowledge of printmaking, of their collections and of art historical method to evolve a competent structure to make this vision become (virtual) reality.